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ABSTRACT

Three case studies in adult literacy learning were conducted, with focus on instructional and policy issues. They came out of programs that, by state mandate, focus instruction around component skills through diagnostic tests, worksheets, and mastery tests. In Case 1, a learner managed to attend an adult basic education program regularly and progressed across several levels of the skill program, yet did not reach her goal of completing her high school education or its equivalent. In Case 2, the subject was described as a model student and lifelong learner, but she avoided focusing on areas in which she needed the most help. Testing revealed surprisingly low reading and vocabulary levels. In Case 3, the learner finally committed to job training. Her learning situation was characterized by insufficient diagnostic information. No examples of learning breakthroughs were found in any of the case studies. All three learners struggled to advance in basic skills. The teachers were confronted with a wider range of abilities in their classrooms than they could handle effectively and had little, if any, diagnostic information to guide their individual instruction. Because of open entry/open exit policies and a desire to allow students to set their own instructional goals, instructors usually had separate plans and materials for each student. The implication was that these policies, the instructional procedures, and the program evaluation methods should be questioned. (Contains 15 references.) (YLB)

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Policy and Practice in Adult Learning: A Case Study Perspective

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Christine Brooks
Christine Carino

University of Delaware

NCAL Technical Report TR96-06

June 1996

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Policy and Practice in Adult Learning: A Case Study Perspective

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Abstract

Three case studies in adult literacy learning are reported in this paper, all bearing on both instructional and policy issues. All of the case studies come out of programs that, by state mandate, focus instruction around component skills through diagnostic tests, worksheets, and mastery tests. No examples of learning breakthroughs were found in any of these cases nor in ten others that were compiled at the same time. All three learners struggled to advance in basic skills, particularly in writing. The teachers were confronted with a wider range of abilities in their classrooms than they could handle effectively and had little, if any, diagnostic information to guide their individual instruction. Because of open entry/open exit policies and a desire to allow students to set their own instructional goals, instructors usually had separate plans and materials for each student. These policies are questioned, as are the instructional procedures used and the methods through which such programs are evaluated.

Introduction

Adult basic education in the United States is a patchwork of federal, state, and local programs, aimed toward helping individuals and families acquire the skills they need to obtain and hold remunerative jobs, manage their homes, and participate fully in community and civic affairs. These programs range from volunteer tutoring of near illiterates to General Educational Development (GED) preparation and workplace skill training. Although "adult literacy" often forms the core of the curriculum of such programs and has, perhaps by default, become the aegis under which such programs are referenced, much more than traditional literacy skills are usually taught. GED programs, for example, focus on the five subject areas of the GED Tests: writing, social studies, science, mathematics, and literature and the arts.

Whatever the adequacy of the federal and state investments in adult basic skills, the effectiveness of the various programs is a continuing concern, as are the numerous policies that allocate and regulate this investment. Literacy, as a proxy for basic skills, is a difficult concept both to define and to measure (Venezky, Wagner, & Ciliberti, 1990). Although originally associated with reading and writing, literacy, at the adult level, has been inflated by some to include basic mathematics, oral communication, and even some life skills. Recently, two major surveys of adult literacy abilities and adult literacy programs have been released. The National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS) is an assessment of literacy abilities in a nationally stratified sample of about 25,000 persons, ages 16 and up (Kirsch, Jungeblut, Jenkins, & Kolstad, 1993). Depending upon which arbitrary level one accepts for adequate literacy functioning, the results of this survey can be interpreted either as a confirmation of generally adequate literacy abilities in the United States population or as cause for immediate alarm.

The second survey, the National Evaluation of Adult Education Programs (NEAEP), assessed the characteristics of approximately 93% of the 2,819 federally funded English as a second language (ESL), adult basic education (ABE), and adult secondary education (ASE) programs operating in the spring of 1991 (Development Associates, Inc., 1992, 1993). Results, which are still being analyzed, indicate that almost all programs offer some support services along with instruction—the most frequently offered being counseling, job search help, and transportation. About 54% of the adult students attend evening courses, typically 2–4 evenings per week. Attrition rates across all programs are high, however. Of those who enroll for courses, 15–20% never attend a single class, and, of those who do attend, only about 40% are still active after 20 weeks of instruction and only about 13% after 40 weeks (Development Associates, Inc., 1993).

These surveys, along with others on a smaller scale, offer one set of perspectives on a highly complex and distributed educational system that, unlike the elementary/secondary system, lacks a substantial infrastructure. For policy formation, however, these data are incomplete. They do not reveal how policy is transformed into practice. That transformation is, in part, determined by the conditions under which adult literacy programs operate, the characteristics of those adults who attend, and the manner in which students encounter instruction. What policies might induce more adults in need to attend programs, improve the efficiency of instruction and its outcomes, or better serve the needs of families and employers cannot be determined from these survey results. One heeded complement to the available data is a perspective from the side of the learner and the instructor. To this end, a series of case histories are reported here, derived from a Case Study Group, composed of adult literacy instructors, researchers, and graduate students, that met monthly in northern Delaware from April 1993 until June 1994.

In the cases described below, learning issues comprise the core of the discussion. Information about the individuals' home, work, and personal situations is offered when it is relevant to teaching and learning. We have tried not to stress this side of the adult literacy story, however, because it can too easily obscure all other aspects of the students' activities. That is,

although we are dealing with human beings who, in some cases, have difficult challenges in their personal lives, we are primarily interested in how much they learned from adult literacy instruction and why. The style of these case histories falls somewhere between that used by Monroe (1928) and that used by both Johnston (1965) and the Center for Literacy Studies (1992). Although we are interested in both diagnosis and remediation (as in the former collection) and in the affective aspects of reading failure (as in the latter two), we are also concerned with classroom procedures, with resource allocation, and with policy issues.

If there is a principle that has guided the development of these written cases, then it is one that derives from a diagnostic and remediation instructional model, and a learning context in which instructional goals are the central focus. By concentrating on these aspects , we do not mean to ignore the importance of issues like student anxiety, attributions, self-confidence, and motivation. All of these must be attended to in an effective learning environment, and many are discussed in the cases presented, but we do not see them as the goals of adult basic education. Stated differently, our perspective is that most adults can learn basic reading, writing, and mathematics, regardless of their entry level abilities, and that classes exist to achieve these goals. There should be little satisfaction, therefore, in a situation where, after a year or more of instruction, the only tangible change is a purported increase in self-confidence by the learner or a more positive attitude toward literacy. Significant improvements in learning as a result of adult literacy instruction, however, are difficult to find (Venezky, Bristow, & Sabatini, 1993). What we hope will emerge from the cases presented here is a basis for understanding what can be done to promote higher levels of learning and, therefore, what policies are most desirable at the local, state, and federal levels. (For a general discussion of case methods, see Broudy, 1990 and McAninch, 1993.)

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Case 1: Ms. A

At the beginning of this study, Ms. A represented the positive reality of adult literacy instruction. A healthy, African American woman in her mid-forties, she was employed full-time as a supervisor and building manager of 17 custodial workers. She had recently been promoted from janitor, and she enjoyed strong support from her supervisor, coworkers, family, and friends for furthering her education. In a company newsletter dated July 1993, Ms. A's supervisor wrote about her: "She has been enrolled in night courses for over two years and has not only gained the knowledge associated with schooling, but her self-esteem, self-confidence, and overall outlook on life has [*sic*] improved. Ms. [A] was recently promoted to Area Manager of our [xxx] site and through hard work and proper attitude I know she will go far." A few months before this newsletter appeared, Ms. A wrote in a class writing exercise, "I had plenty of support from my family, friends, coworkers, my night instructor and especially my supervisor." In the same exercise she noted, "My attitude in the past towards education was very poor, but I have reached a point in my life when I'm looking forward to continuing my education."

Background

Ms. A left school in the 10th grade, at the same time that she decided to move out of her home and lead an independent life. She now has a 12-year-old daughter who has, for prolonged periods, lived with friends nearby. (Ms. A is separated from her current husband, who is not the father of her daughter.) Her literacy habits appear to be in transition. On one hand, she says she likes to read and always has, but she is an occasional, not a regular, reader. For book and magazine reading, she prefers the Bible and *Reader's Digest*. Newspaper reading is more regular, but is limited primarily to the obituaries and local events. She avoids the front page because it only has

"crimes, killings, and the President lying," and she ignores the sports page out of personal taste, even though she enjoys playing sports. However, either just before or just after her promotion, she began reading magazines like *Today's Woman* for ideas about management and made a booklet of the articles and notes that she found. This was shared with her coworkers in a meeting. She also works cryptograms and has taught her staff how to work them.

Literacy Program

The evening ABE class that Ms. A attends meets in the YMCA of a medium size urban area for two hours on each of two weeknights. The instructor has been teaching adult education classes since 1978. He holds a BS in psychology and an MS in counseling psychology and maintains a small private counseling practice along with a full-time position with the mental health division of the state. (Ten to fifteen students were enrolled in the program over the period of the Case Study Group, but usually fewer than 10 attended any given session.) Although each student works at his or her level and concentrates on the skills most needed, all derive their skill work from an individual skills prescription program called Learning Unlimited, which has mastery tests and workbooks.[1] When students come to class, they sign the attendance book and then check their personal folders or check with the instructor to find what they are to do next. Generally, they receive either a specific workbook or a mastery test. When a workbook exercise is completed, it is brought to the instructor who grades it while the student observes. The instructor also gives suggestions for doing the items that were worked incorrectly. Sometimes, more practice is recommended. Otherwise, the student can do the related mastery test, which is usually 10 to 15 short-answer or multiple-choice items, all similar to those in the workbook.

Mastery tests are also graded by the instructor while the student observes, and are placed in the student's file once they are discussed. If the student passes, he or she can proceed to the next objective. If not, more practice is usually prescribed. Mastery tests are not timed and may be started at the end of one class and completed at the end of another. Within the complete Learning Unlimited Program, skills are grouped by level (A, B, C, etc.), and within level by skill domain (e.g., decoding, literal comprehension, whole number operations, problem solving). Each level also has a diagnostic test that is used to decide which skills need to be worked on and retested. At Level B, where Ms. A was working in the early spring of 1992, decoding has 9 subskills or objectives; structural analysis, 6; vocabulary, 1; literal comprehension, 3; paragraph writing, 1; numbers and numeration, 3; whole number operations, 23; and problem solving, 2.

Although students work independently in the class, there is an air of camaraderie and purpose in the room. Students greet each other on entering class, conversations within class are spoken in a normal voice, and most students work steadily from entry to exit without a break. Some of the more outgoing students, like Ms. A, may make comments to the entire class during an evening; most, however, work quietly. The instructor exhibits great patience, working with students one at a time, trying to reach everyone in an evening session.

Ms. A's long-term goal is to complete her high school education. She feels that although she had a poor attitude about learning before, she now sees the value of completing her education. Enrollment in an ABE class was a first step toward completion of a high school diploma or a GED certificate.

Skill Learning

Ms. A's reading skills were above average for adults returning for ABE instruction. Her oral reading was generally fluent and her recognition vocabulary was good. Two- and three-syllable words like *grievous*, *mischievous*, and *admission* were no problem, although *representative* and *nuisance* were. According to the Learning Unlimited Mastery Tests (Level

B), she knew the basic phonics elements (consonants, blends, digraphs, etc.), but not some of the word-based skills (affixed words, possessive nouns, and syllables). She also failed to master two of the three subtests for literal comprehension at this level (details and following directions). It is difficult to determine, however, how much of her difficulty derived from the testing paradigms used and how much from the skill content.

In contrast, her writing is replete with logical and grammatical error—over and above omissions and verb usages that may derive from Black dialect (e.g., "you be doing a good job," "some crimes may not been helped"). Her punctuation is erratic, especially commas, and in one place an exclamation mark was used where a question mark was expected. She shows little evidence, furthermore, of self-editing. The overall impression of her writing, however, is that, with frequent writing and rewriting, significant improvements would occur. Ideas are usually expressed clearly, paragraphs usually start with strong topic sentences, and personal letters end with appropriate concluding sentences. Composition needs improvement, nevertheless, as does coherence.

Mathematics has been the most challenging area for Ms. A, and her progress has been slow although she spends the majority of her class time on this subject. Her instructor's notes for February and early March 1994 mentioned general concentration problems as well as difficulties with specific tasks such as borrowing in subtraction. Ms. A made slow but steady progress in mathematics through the early spring of 1994, but her problems with concentration continued. Verbal instructions and procedures seemed to help her the most; when she could rehearse a list of steps and then practice them by herself, she seemed not only to do her best work but also to show the most confidence in her own abilities. But toward the end of March, she began to experience health problems. Her instructor recorded on March 28, "She has been extremely tired lately and is presently undergoing tests for high cholesterol and colitis." These health problems continued through the spring and into the summer. In addition, she began to experience unspecified problems at home, most probably with her daughter, but also possibly with her estranged husband.

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Her instructor noted on April 11 that "[Ms. A] has many personal problems which are preventing her from concentrating." On April 14 came the further note, "A major complication in her personal life. [She] will call to discuss." From that time until the 22nd of June, when she decided to drop out of the class to spend more time with her daughter, she attended only 5 of 15 class sessions. On May 20, which was the last full class she attended until the June 22 class, her instructor noted that she "seems to be losing steam, which may be as a result of personal problems at home. This is part of the reason for most of her absences."

Further clouding the positive picture that was presented at the beginning of this vignette was a sense that, on the one hand, Ms. A was feeling that she wasn't progressing fast enough toward her goals, but, on the other hand, she appeared unwilling to consider advancing to adult high school classes. The latter attitude is discussed by her instructor in a journal entry of March 28: "Discussed eventually moving to [XXX] High School. She wanted to stay where she is. My feeling is that [Ms. A], and a number of other students become so complacent...in this type of setting they fear the thought of leaving." The former attitude is recounted in an entry of April 21: "She is working well toward her goal, although according to her not fast enough." How much of this feeling of lack of sufficient progress was a result of the personal problems she was suffering at the time and how much was a result of the continual struggle with mathematics and writing cannot be determined from the available evidence. Perhaps both contributed.

Surprisingly, throughout the period when her attendance was so spotty, when she did come to class, she tended to work hard, and she did manage to pass several Learning Unlimited mastery tests, particularly in reading skills. In mathematics and writing she continued to struggle, although some bright spots were recorded. On May 12, for example, her instructor wrote, "I believe that she is making progress toward feeling comfortable writing and making connections." However, after the preceding class (May 9), it was recorded that she "has difficulty putting her thoughts

accurately on paper....Progress is being made slowly. She needs to continue to write more. She tends to dread this activity due to her awareness that it takes time." In mathematics, her work was even less rewarding. On April 14, for example, her instructor wrote, "She needs continued practice in math skills. She didn't do well on her math diagnosis."

Conclusions

In retrospect, there are two sides to Ms. A's story. On one hand, she managed to attend an ABE program regularly for almost three years, and progressed across several levels of the skill program she was working in. Her literacy habits outside of class were increasing, at least as evidenced by her interest in management articles in journals. Her supervisor observed a positive change in her self-esteem and self-confidence. Yet, she has not reached her goal of completing her high school education or obtaining a GED certificate, and her continuation in the ABE program is in doubt.[2] Conflicts with her daughter (and perhaps with her husband), at least on the surface, are draining whatever energy she has when she returns from work each day. To spend two hours in the evening struggling with mathematics problems and writing probably is a burden that is currently beyond her physical and emotional capacity.

One might also question whether or not a skills-based program was the best prescription for Ms. A. The language-arts exercises seldom gave her any challenge, but her performance level in reading was far above the basic-skills level, and she probably would have benefitted more from holistic tasks like the booklet she created on her own for management materials. Particularly in writing, she needed more practice in composing longer works (letters, reports, short essays, etc.). She also needed to learn how to proof her own work and to do second and third drafts. At several points over the past year, her instructor did suggest that she keep a journal and write in it every day, but there is no evidence that she ever did this. His other attempts to encourage her to write more also failed, perhaps for the reasons noted in his May 9 journal entry cited above.

Only in mathematics was skill practice clearly needed, but, even here, more applied problems might have led to higher motivation to learn. Perhaps her abilities in reading could have been used to advance her mathematics and writing. Giving her articles on how to solve mathematics problems and how to write better may have helped her not only with these areas but also with moving toward more self-directed learning. One of the biggest dangers of strict skills-based programs for adults is that they seldom encourage independent learning and teach few, if any, study skills. These concerns about skill-based programs are mostly speculations, however, and they assume the availability of curricular materials, diagnostic testing, and instructor time that were not available in Ms. A's class. There is no guarantee, furthermore, that had a more functional context course been selected, Ms. A would still be attending regularly or making any faster progress.

Case 2: Ms. B

Background

Ms. B was born in Lodz, Poland in 1949. She came to the United States with her father at the age of 16 and spoke no English at that point in her life. (Her mother had died while she was still living in Poland.) Her father completed elementary school in Poland, and her mother was in her second year of studying to be a hairdresser when she passed away. Ms. B is now married and has two children, both of whom are bilingual. Her husband is employed by a plumbing and

heating company, having received vocational training while still in Poland. Her daughter is 20 and attends a local technical school. Her son, 18, is learning disabled, and, after being rejected from Naval basic training for what was classified as a weight problem, he is now training with the Army National Guard and no longer lives at home. Her family is very supportive of her educational efforts.

Ms. B has been running her own beauty salon for at least 10 years and does all of the management and bookkeeping by herself. In an interview in March of 1994, she remarked that she was "head of the house when it comes to paying bills, going to the bank, and things like that." She explained how she maintained two separate bank accounts, one for her business and one for her home. In the recent past, she had considered switching careers and began studying for a commercial driver's license so that she could find a job like school bus driving that provided benefits and a pension. After a short time, however, she abandoned the idea of switching careers.

Despite her demanding work and class schedules, Ms. B makes time for community activities. Both she and her husband are United States citizens and are registered voters. She has worked in a local court as a translator for Polish émigrés and helps sponsor them as well. She is especially attuned to current events, and, in addition to watching the CBS evening news and CNN, she attends public lectures. She also has a close circle of friends who are supportive of her educational pursuits.

Literacy Program

While in Poland, Ms. B completed junior high school. Soon after arriving in the United States, she began attending a vocational school and in 1967—two years after coming to the United States—she passed her hairdresser's examination and was licensed. (At that time, there was no English requirement to get a hairdresser's license.) In the fall of 1992, she began attending an adult high school program, primarily to improve her ability to read and write English. Her instructor, who holds an MA in special education, has been teaching ABE and GED classes for about 17 years. The instructor also coordinates special needs programs for young adults in a local school district and teaches courses on educational technology. During the fall semester, Ms. B was enrolled in two evening courses, an English class and a reading class, and attended both religiously. She began using Learning Unlimited upon her entrance into the English class and was tested at Level A (the lowest level), mastering 26% of the diagnostic test. She completed Level A in November and worked on the subskills in her Level B prescription until the following February. By the end of her first year in the program, she successfully completed all of the levels through D. Her diagnostic test results for that level were her highest, showing mastery of 48% of the material. Prior to that, she had never scored higher than 29% on a diagnostic test.

Skill Progress

In the fall of 1993, Ms. B registered again for the basic English class, but also enrolled in a basic math and a U. S. history class. It was initially her goal that year to obtain a GED certificate, which the State of Delaware allowed to count for 10 credits towards a high school diploma. This, however, was the final year that such credit would be permitted within the state. At this time, she also took an Official GED Practice Test and scored an average of 36 on the five sections. Her time spent in English class focused on getting through Level E of Learning Unlimited and doing related GED exercises. She still participated in general class discussions and worked on writing assignments. By December of 1993, Ms. B found attending school four nights a week and running her business all day to be rather stressful. She then cut her class schedule back to two nights per week, continuing the same evening schedule through the spring

semester. During this time, Ms. B's goal switched from obtaining a GED certificate to remaining in her instructor's English class "forever."

Ms. B completed Level E of Learning Unlimited early in 1994 and continued on to Level F where, in February, she showed mastery of 36% of the material on the diagnostic test. At this point Ms. B had reached what her instructor called a "plateau" in her learning, and, although her attendance and motivation remained high throughout the spring, she made little progress beyond this point. (Except for two class periods missed because of a gall bladder operation, her attendance during the spring semester was perfect.) In addition to assigning a weekly spelling exercise and an essay following many class discussions, the instructor attempted to motivate her to use computer programs to supplement her Learning Unlimited activities. Ms. B was highly resistant to this idea, sometimes immersing herself in other activities during class to avoid having to use the computer. It was not until March that she finally gave in to working on computer materials, but that was due more to the encouragements of one of her classmates with whom she worked closely than to any interest in technology per se.

At the end of the spring semester, Ms. B had received the maximum amount of credit one could obtain for the basic English class. Nevertheless, she registered again for the basic English course with the same instructor in the fall of 1994, along with a science class. In the English, class, her instructor did additional work with her on science, and assigned independent work in Learning Unlimited math. Ms. B once again expressed an interest in receiving a high school diploma, since the close friend and classmate mentioned earlier was transferring credits from previous instruction abroad and would be able to receive a diploma upon successful completion of the spring semester courses.

Since a Learning Unlimited level can be passed with 80% mastery of the subskills overall, students can progress to relatively high levels with deficiencies in specific skills. For Ms. B, the Individual Skills Profiles for each of various levels she passed or worked on revealed a number of such deficiencies. For example, she did not master any topics in *structural analysis* until she reached Level D, nor did she master *sentence writing* up until this point. She has yet to master *paragraph writing* on any of the diagnostic tests, although she successfully completed the worksheet associated with it on her Individual Skills Prescription. She never mastered more than one area in *decoding*, a category that appears on each diagnostic test up to and including Level C. In this area, she has yet to master the *vowels* or the *vowel digraphs and diphthongs* categories, and, although she mastered *initial consonants* in Level A, she failed to do so in Level B.

Learning Needs

The instructor's log entries and presentations to the Case Study Group reveal that Ms. B is highly concrete and has trouble especially with conceptual relationships like cause and effect (December 15, 1993), that she gets frustrated easily (April 29, 1994), and that she does not like to read and hates to write, even in Polish (April 1 & April 29, 1994). Her English language vocabulary was still judged to be low (as it was in May 1993) and her oral reading was characterized as "cautious" (June 1, 1994). She will also redo a skill assignment time after time to improve her score.

In spite of her English language limitations, Ms. B is the first in class discussions to give an opinion, solicited or otherwise. She also provides support to other members of the class, offering assistance with schoolwork and motivating them to levels of completion, often giving an "if I can do it, so can you" explanation. Her outspoken but self-assured manner is sometimes so convincing that, on one occasion, she persuaded a substitute teacher to agree that completing the work left by the instructor was not necessary. Her outgoing interest in maintaining interpersonal relationships promotes a family atmosphere in the class, as she often provides everything from birthday cakes to advice on general life issues for her classmates. Her instructor

commented recently that "Ms. B is a kind, giving person, and that attitude is a strong factor that binds my class together and encourages others to learn."

The skills she is weakest in, however, are the ones she is most resistant to practicing. For example, in a recent exercise involving paying bills, Ms. B was given a booklet from her local power company to work from, but she refused to use it. She explained that she "never looks up questions in any sort of book because that's what the phone is for," and she will either call for information or visit the office in person. When asked for a list of words that she associated with "bills," she was able to give an extensive oral list, but had difficulty writing them down and excluded many of them from her written list.

According to Ms. B's instructor (May 1993), "Her strengths are in coping skills and in oral communication." In writing, "she appears to be on a fourth to fifth grade level." The instructor felt that "Ms. B has a low English vocabulary and uses rather simple sentences." Writing samples that she has submitted further demonstrated Ms. B's extensive use of simple sentences; in the past year, however, some improvement in sentence structure and usage have become evident. More recent writing samples also reveal better use of verb tense, capitalization, and punctuation. The instructor also mentioned Ms. B's inability to perform well during timed testing situations. She cited her inability to understand planning in a constricted time frame as the reason.

Current Goals

Ms. B has a newfound interest in acquiring a high school diploma, but, according to her instructor, her motivation for completing the degree has not increased. Instead, she is searching for a way to use her credits from Poland to apply towards the diploma, as her foreign peer is planning to do. A letter-writing campaign has proven futile because previous records were lost or damaged. In her instructor's opinion, if Ms. B "takes her time and corrects her work, she can function much higher than her initial effort shows." However she "lacks the discipline to want [the degree] 100%."

No changes have taken place in Ms. B's preference for oral communication, but "she can cope with eighth grade reading material if she takes the time." In class, she is now doing sixth-grade work independently, and her "strongest achievements have been in writing and her belief in herself that she can tackle regular class work." Her instructor also commented that "timed testing situations still upset her." Ms. B has since discontinued using Learning Unlimited, and her teacher attributes this to her "plateauing out" in that area, but concedes that "it could also be because if she were to go further, it would require use of the computer" for many of the subskills.

Conclusions

Ms. B's teacher describes her as a model student and a lifelong adult learner. She is confident that, when she finally leaves the high school program, she will continue her pursuit of knowledge through other media. Ms. B's explanation of her interest in education illustrates this, as she once wrote "I don't care about my grade, I care about getting it into my head." Nevertheless, Ms. B manages to avoid focusing on the areas in which she needs the most help, perhaps out of fear of failure. A large chasm exists between her avowed interest in learning and the effort she exerts to acquire new abilities. In writing, in particular, she continues to avoid serious practice, either in class or at home, even though some progress has been shown with the minimal effort made. Although her reluctance to use a computer for skill practice is not unusual for a person her age who has had no previous experience with technology, her vehemence in resisting any computer experiences is unusual.

Recent testing of Ms. B for a different project revealed surprisingly low reading and vocabulary levels, little of which could be attributed to poor test-taking skills.[3] On an individually administered, standardized reading test (The Weschler Individual Achievement Test, Reading Comprehension, 1992 edition), she scored at a fourth/fifth grade level. On a multiple-choice vocabulary test, she incorrectly matched synonyms for words like *exterior*, *foolish*, *smooth*, *oppose*, and *violent*. Whether her reading and writing problems derive from a more general English language deficiency, from a learning disability, or some other cause cannot be determined from the data collected so far. Her ability to run a business, raise a family, and cope with everyday social and civic affairs is remarkable, given these low levels of print functioning. However, diagnostic testing for memory, problem solving, language functioning, and other cognitive skills is needed. She probably would be content to continue as she has over the past two years in the same basic English class, but much more progress might be made if a more precise evaluation could be made of her learning abilities.

Perhaps most disconcerting about Ms. B is the enormous amount of time devoted to Learning Unlimited activities, with concomitant appearance of progress as marked by progression from Level A to Level F but without elimination of many basic reading and writing deficiencies. Ms. B clearly has problems with basic decoding and word recognition, as well as with most of the skills that build on these abilities, yet she has managed to demonstrate mastery of Levels A–E in Learning Unlimited. The deficits in these skills may explain why she appears to have stalled at Level F in the program. Just before the 1994 Christmas recess, Ms. B decided to go back to Level E and do the computer work associated with the skills involved. Her reason for doing this was that she did not feel that she had learned these skills well enough. Nevertheless, a stronger diagnosis and remediation program might have allowed significantly more focused practice and perhaps greater progress.

Case 3: Ms. C

Background

Ms. C is an unemployed 24-year-old African American with three children, ages 8, 5, and 1. She would like to be a clothing designer or perhaps a computer repair person. Her mother raised her, although her grandmother also played an important role in her upbringing. Sometime during tenth grade, she dropped out of school; she enrolled in a GED program administered by Delaware Adolescent Program, Inc. (DAPI) in October 1992 because of a recent state mandate for educational training as a condition for public assistance and food stamps. Both her mother and her father received some college education, and her mother provides some assistance now with the children, as does her grandmother, who lives nearby. However, her relationship with her mother appears somewhat strained. The fathers of the children also provide some assistance.

Literacy Program

The instructor for Ms. C's class holds an MS in special education and has taught at the high school level, doing reading diagnosis and individual educational programs. She team-teaches the program in which Ms. C is currently enrolled and also teaches a GED course three hours each week at a local high school. Once each week, a social worker is present to help relate education to other student needs. Although the DAPI program is oriented toward GED certification, its enrollment varies from low ABE students with poor reasoning skills to true GED-level students.

Ms. C was apparently labeled as learning disabled in high school, and, as far as she can remember, all of her work during her last full year of school (ninth grade) was in special education courses. Among her strengths are good mechanical skills—she repairs machines around the house and also works on her own car. Math is her favorite school subject and English her least favorite. She says she has difficulty with reading, especially "big words." (On the Botel Reading Inventory, Word Opposites Test A, she scored at Level G on entry to her current program.) Although her general reading skills are near high school level, she has difficulties with complex texts, and her vocabulary is limited. By far, however, her weakest area is writing. Her instructor wrote earlier this year (March 21, 1994) that "[Ms. C] can give great answers in phrases or short factual answers, but she has great difficulty putting her thoughts into complete sentences."

Writing Problems

With poor spelling, intrusions from an urban, Black dialect, and limited editing ability, her writing barely qualifies for middle elementary school. Her instructor noted writing difficulties on a number of occasions, and especially Ms. C's inability to organize her writing. On March 21, 1994, she wrote that Ms. C "wants to give all the details immediately in her writing. She has trouble thinking in general terms....Lots of work is needed on basic sentence structure...[and on] getting her to think about writing in an organized fashion." Her approach to writing is a conversational style, best described by Bereiter and Scardamalia (1986) as knowledge-telling rather than knowledge-transformative.

Home literacy practices appear to be limited. A newspaper is read at most once each week (Sunday), but she does help her oldest child with his homework, and, according to her, he is doing "OK" in school. She writes "when she feels like it," which appears to be mostly letters to mail-order companies in response to incorrect handling of her orders. She also orders things for her children from cereal boxes and writes when she does that. As a child, she did this for herself and remembers feeling good then about her competence in handing these tasks.

Skill Progress

Ms. C started working in November 1992 in Level B of the same skills program (Learning Unlimited) used by both Ms. A and Ms. B. She completed Level B reading in December 1992 and Level B math in March 1993. Level C reading was completed in May 1993 and Level C math in November 1993. In April 1994, she completed Level D reading and attempted that same month the GED Practice Tests in Social Studies, Science, and Literature and the Arts, receiving standard scores of 20, 39, and 41, respectively, in the three areas. She refused to take the writing subtest because of a lack of confidence in her own abilities in this area, and both she and her instructor agreed that she was not ready for the math subtest. (She had made some progress in Learning Unlimited math, particularly in areas like percentage and signed numbers, but had difficulties with math story problems because of their reading demands.)

Personal Commitment

Although Ms. C worked diligently when she was in class and showed progress in her academic work, her commitment to either a GED certificate or high school completion was not high. The class she was enrolled in met from 9:00 a.m. until 11:30 a.m. five days each week. Ms. C, however, rarely arrived in class before 10 a.m. and often came even later or did not attend at all. In late March 1994, the social worker assigned to the class reclassified Ms. C as a mandatory First Step participant, which meant that she not only had to attend class regularly to receive the welfare benefits that she was currently receiving, but that she also had to participate in a job placement program. Ms. C's reaction was to be late or absent nearly every class day in April,

leading to a stronger warning from the social worker on April 27 stating that if her attendance didn't improve, her AFDC payments would be reduced, and she would be required to transfer to a different training program that met for more hours each week.

The next day she attended for two hours and her instructor noted in her log "9:30–11:30 for 2 hrs!!!!!!!first time ever!!" For the next few class periods, she also attended for two hours each but, within a week, she had slipped back to an hour and three quarters with occasional absences. This pattern continued into June, which was the end of the case study record for Ms. C. No action was taken against Ms. C for her attendance pattern, in spite of the warnings she received.

Another indication of Ms. C's limited interest in job training was seen at the end of January 1994, when she was tested for admission to a job-training program. Although she qualified, she refused to commit to the program, which would have required her to be in job-training classes five days per week, 8:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m., for three months. Her refusal was based on a desire not to have her two youngest children in daycare for long periods of time. In March of this same year, she took a JTPA placement test at a local technical college and qualified for nursing training. Once again, however, she refused to enroll. A third opportunity to enter job training occurred at the end of May, but she declined yet again.

To round out the academic performance of Ms. C up to the end of the time during which the Case Study Group met, it is important to add that the instructor's log contains a number of entries that record successful performance and high motivation. Besides a computer writing experience, many math exercises were done with a high degree of accuracy, as were a number of reading exercises. Entries like "[Ms. C] really used her time well this hour." (May 17, 1994) and "Worked independently. She was quite pleased with her test scores." (March 30, 1994) occur from time to time, indicating that, in general, when Ms. C came to class, she worked seriously and diligently. Few entries record discouragement or frustration.

Postscript

From the final meeting of the Case Study Group (June, 1994) through the time this report was written (January, 1995), Ms. C continued with the same sporadic attendance pattern, concentrating on vocabulary development and sentence and paragraph writing. Her work was judged to be quite good by her instructor, and she progressed further in Learning Unlimited. She even felt motivated enough during this period to buy a hardback dictionary, so her instructor began to structure the reading assignments to use the vocabulary that she had been working on. She was encouraged by the progress she was making, particularly in reading, and she even started journal writing in the fall but stopped at the end of October because she disliked it. (Her instructor tried to encouraged her to continue writing, but she resisted.)

Early winter brought some financial hardships; the father of one of her children went to prison, thus negating one source of support. She started "doing hair" in the evenings and was too tired to get up for school many mornings. This was another setback, but her instructor, working with the social worker, encouraged her to continue her participation. She did work at home, but there was not enough time for her instructor to give her feedback. In the middle of December, her instructor encouraged her to enroll in WAVES, a program offered through the Vocational Technical School District for exploring the construction trades. She was selected as one of the 12 candidates for that cycle of training and was offered transportation and funding for evening daycare. She was quite excited about this opportunity and began the program January 4 with the intention to continue attending her GED class.

Ms. C also had some recent academic success, scoring a 46 on the GED Math Practice Test AA, timed with no assistance, on August 3, 1994. She was also awarded a Basic Skills Certificate I in December 1994 and was honored in front of her classmates. Although she has

reported some strain in her relationship with her mother in the past, Ms. C brought her mother to this presentation. In a recent interview, she confided that her eight-year-old son is experiencing great difficulty in reading and behavior in school. Her five-year-old son is basically non-verbal (gives one-word answers) and attends speech and language development programs. She says that she experienced similar difficulties when she was young. Her instructor feels that if Ms. C 's attendance pattern were less sporadic, she would be well beyond her present level.

Conclusions

At first glance, it appeared that Ms. C was quite comfortable on welfare and unwilling to engage herself in either job training or basic education beyond what was required for maintaining her welfare payments. This, however, would have been too harsh a judgment, as her progress after the end of the Case Study Group revealed. Either because of the success she had in class or because of the recent financial pressures—coupled with the transportation and daycare provisions of the training program—she was finally willing to make a commitment to job training. The persistence of her instructors in reaching out to her and in encouraging her were critical components of this decision, and her desire to remain in the GED program in the mornings was perhaps motivated as much by a desire to retain a familiar and supportive structure as it was by any particular academic goals.

In reflecting on this case, it is important to consider that a young woman who has been raising children since she was 16 and who did not have particularly positive experiences in school may not believe that the returns from education will be high for her. She has struggled with reading and writing and was discouraged by her initially poor performance on the GED Practice Tests. Although she was eager to begin working on a word processor and did well the few times she was able to have computer time, the limited availability of computers in the classroom reduced whatever motivation computer access normally brings. Nevertheless, while in class, she did work seriously on assignments and progressed through three of the Learning Unlimited levels.

We are also confronted once again with a learning situation characterized by insufficient diagnostic information. If Ms. C had been placed in special education in high school, then valuable information might have been available on her skill deficits and learning problems from the high school files. However, no mechanism exists for the instructor to obtain these records, even if they are still available, and funding for diagnostic testing in the current program is severely limited. The Learning Unlimited Program provides practice on a broad range of specific skills, but has a limited diagnostic instrument and does not attend to basic processing factors such as fluency or phonological recoding.

Ms. C's writing problems appear to be serious, not only at the basic sentence level but also at the organizational level. Basic skills practice may help with specific problems like subject-verb agreement, but learning to compose paragraphs and larger structures requires planning, drafting, and redrafting, with competent feedback and assistance. In a classroom where a single instructor is confronted with 10 or more individual learning problems, such assistance is difficult to provide. Whether peer editing and review can work in such a context is questionable; nevertheless, it probably should be tried. In addition to peer review, there should also be more requirements for writing such as essays, letters, and journals that are written in daily.

We will leave aside for now a discussion of how long a person like Ms. C should be allowed to remain in a GED class or any other basic skills program. We will mention, however, that, considering limited classroom space and instructor time, those who are not willing to attend regularly do not deserve to be retained. Instead, they should be required to enroll in job-training programs that prepare them for positions commensurate with their current skill levels. But Ms. C worked seriously when she did attend. Some others, many of whom attend regularly,

do not make the same effort to learn. Should continuation in a program be based on physical presence or upon total work effort? Ms. C's instructors and social worker felt that she would continue to profit from instruction, even with her poor attendance record, and allowed her to remain in the GED class. The results of this decision appear to be positive.

General Conclusions

In the three cases reported here and in the other ten for which we collected information, no major learning breakthroughs occurred. No student revealed exceptional academic talents that, once allowed into the sunlight, led to rapid acceleration toward high school completion, GED certification, or higher level accomplishments. Instead, the norm was slow progress—sometimes steady, sometimes uneven—without an acceleration of learning corresponding to increased exposure to study and problem-solving skills. All students required individual assistance with learning and all struggled to advance their basic skills. Furthermore, each case contained either a history of special education classification or a hint of a learning disability, although none of the students appeared to have any serious mental deficits.

Although most of the classroom work prescribed for these students revolved around specific academic skills, all of the students had difficulty coping with complex tasks and with other more general demands such as organization in writing. Their programs were built around a skill-based program that required work across a wide variety of skills at each level of accomplishment, thus discouraging concentration for more than a few class sessions on any single skill.

Instructional Issues

In addition, diagnostic testing was not integral to any of the programs observed and records from high school or from other adult literacy classes were not available for the instructors. Although the skill-based program had what it called a diagnostic test for each level, these were brief assessments of skills, like converting a decimal number to a percentage or selecting the correct form of a verb to agree with a designated noun. The need for fluency in basic skills was totally ignored by these programs. Measures of speed were not included nor were any exercises provided to encourage speeded practice. Similarly, no diagnosis was made of fundamental or general traits like working memory, phonological awareness, or logical reasoning.

Within the programs, resources were limited. Teachers struggled to provide individual assistance to more students than they could handle effectively. Alternative instructional materials were not generally available nor were more than one or two computers per classroom. One class was taught by a team of two teachers (teaching on alternate days) and another occasionally had an aide, but, even with these augmentations, the range of individual needs was far wider than what any single teacher could manage. In addition, specialists in diagnostic testing, hearing/vision screening, and other specialties were not available for special needs. The result was that each teacher depended more upon the prescribed program (Learning Unlimited) than he or she might have wanted. Whether we apply labels like special education or not, many adult literacy programs function as elementary- or secondary-level special education classes in that the students generally have learning problems that require extensive individual assistance. Without diagnostic information and without the instructional resources needed for a true diagnosis and prescription approach, it will be difficult to address the needs of many adult education students.

With or without changes in resource allocations, some changes in curriculum and instruction are needed, based upon the observations presented above. The first, and most serious, relates to the use of a program like Learning Unlimited as the primary instructional vehicle. Although we have not done a thorough analysis of this program and others like it and have no reason to be overly negative about it, we do see serious problems with the manner in which it is used. Most of the students that we have observed experience problems in holistic tasks—writing travel instructions, determining how to obtain car insurance from information in a brochure, deciding how much plywood to buy for building a dog house, and so forth. Although instruction is needed by many of these students in component skills for these tasks, this need should be motivated by problems observed in attempting to do the tasks and not by marginally reliable scores on the program diagnostic tests. The focus of instruction needs to be shifted to the full tasks that are needed in everyday life and on the GED Tests, with component skill instruction assigned on the basis of observed difficulties.

Students need assistance in organizing, planning, and problem solving, skills generally ignored in Learning Unlimited. Writing, in particular, needs to be taught from a sequence of meaningful writing assignments, with basic skills pursued when needed. Component skills are needed but not in isolation and not in an arbitrary sequence determined by a skills program. In addition, significantly more practice is needed in certain basic skills to ensure that they become automatic. This requires timed drills and other techniques to assist students in becoming fluent readers, writers, and problem solvers.

Administrative Issues

We also need to question the lack of directiveness in these programs. Adult education programs tend to espouse an open entry/open exit philosophy, with students selecting what goals they will strive for and what work they will do each class period. This attitude derives from a concern for the dignity of the participants, who do not want to be treated like school-age children, and a fear that too much direction might discourage adults from attending classes that could, from a distance, remind them of distasteful school experiences. But this attitude also assumes that adults who have low basic skills are aware of appropriate educational goals and appropriate programs for reaching these goals, assumptions that generally prove to be false.

So much concern is invested in the students' self-images and self-confidence levels that serious learning is sometimes impaired. Both Ms. B and Ms. C showed a reluctance to work on skills that they needed to improve. Both Ms. A and Ms. C were unwilling (at least initially) to advance to higher class levels or job-training programs; Ms. B seemed to have as her primary goal to remain with her current instructor for life, regardless of what she gained from attending the class. Ms. C was required by state law to attend class for a fixed number of hours per week, which she rarely did, yet even with repeated warnings, she continued to avoid the consequences of insufficient attendance.

In the case of Ms. C, however, patience appears to have been rewarded. She has entered a job training program and she has made academic progress, even with increased home pressures. It is hard to tell how much rigor to require for adults. Attendance will probably go down as requirements are stiffened and students are pressed to follow a prescribed course rather than to pursue whatever pleases them at each class period. But the present system may not be meeting many student needs; a well-planned curriculum, delivered to a smaller number of willing students may have a higher payoff than the present scheme. This is not to say that adults should be treated as children but rather that learning should be presented in a more realistic context, making clear to the students that repeated practice to over-learning, focus on skills that are weak, and significant amounts of homework are required to achieve meaningful goals. Dropping students who do not meet minimal requirements for attendance and homework might encourage higher levels of effort from those who truly want to progress, while at the same time,

removing from the teacher's responsibility those who have insufficient motivation to profit from instruction. It also runs the risk of eliminating people like Ms. C who often need time to mature and to gain self-confidence.

These are conjectures, however, and not conclusions from empirical studies—ours or others. What is needed is a healthy debate on these issues, involving students, instructors, researchers, and program administrators. Then, if adequate reasons for change are found, programs will need to experiment with different approaches to rigor. Students will still need to be encouraged and motivated, even those who want to learn. The complications in their lives will also need to be considered with both understanding and compassion. Some insights into these situations might be made through models of adult development, particularly those that measure maturity through reactions to life events like divorce and loss of a job (e.g., Newgarten, 1976; but see also Courtenay, 1994 and Gilligan, 1982).

Policy Issues

From a policy perspective, the cases presented here display some of the complexities of policy formation and policy evaluation. Ms. A and Ms. B, both in their 40s, are productive members of society, employed full-time or, in the case of Ms. B, successfully self-employed. Their needs, and the public interest in their needs, are quite different from those of Ms. C, who has yet to enter the workforce. A dividing line between education for a pressing social need, which justifies the ABE, ASE, and ESL programs, and continuing education for adults seeking enrichment, has never been made, in part because the government has yet to take a strong interest in the latter area. Should all persons without a high school degree or its equivalent receive federal and state assistance for their education, regardless of their own ability to pay and regardless of their reasons for enrolling?

With limited class space and limited instructional resources, including instructor time, should priorities be set for admission? Every minute that Ms. B takes at a computer terminal is a minute less available to someone who may still be on welfare. These are not pleasant decisions to contemplate, and one hopes that resources are sufficient so that they do not need to be faced. But many of the most needy do not attend adult literacy programs (Venezky & Wagner, 1996). If they are to be reached, then either significant new funding will be required or priorities will need to be set, not just for whom to admit, but also for how long to retain someone who is not progressing adequately toward completion.

Similarly, allowing each student to set his or her own instructional goals is a democratic approach to adult education, but it is not an effective way to use limited instructional resources. All of the instructors in the Case Study Group felt, at one time or another, that they could not cope adequately with the range of needs and wants in their classrooms. It is a luxury to offer such an unlimited range of educational services to adults with low basic skills, and it may not be what best serves their needs. More restricted program designs, with fixed sets of skills offered at specified times, might be a more effective approach for adult basic skill education.

For program evaluation, further adjustments need to be made, depending upon how admission and instruction might be reorganized. If programs are to continue on an open entry/open exit basis with learner designation of goals, then evaluation of program outcomes needs to be based upon the specific learner goals involved and not upon an arbitrary skills test or any other single performance measure. Whether strictly affective measures can ever be adequate for program evaluation, we will leave for a different debate. For the present, we will assume that change in ability, as estimated by some performance measure on the content of instruction, is still desired by policymakers.

Adult literacy programs are not entitlements, nor are they social support systems, nor are

they the leading edge of a national lifelong learning program. They are funded to provide the basic educational skills required for successful integration into modern society. To achieve this mission, they need to be structured in a manner conducive to adult learning. Support services are also required to alleviate a variety of barriers to full participation by the target population, such as transportation and childcare assistance, job counseling, and vision and hearing screening. But programs must also be educationally sound if they are to succeed, and it is doubtful that very many programs will meet the expectations of their sponsors when critical educational decisions are primarily made by the participants rather than the instructors and administrators. In the translation of legislation into policy, and policy into practice, adult literacy programs in the United States may have strayed from the most direct route to learning achievement.

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Endnotes

[1] Learning Unlimited is required by the State Office of Adult Education for individualized skill instruction and is, therefore, used in the majority of state-funded programs. Since it was used in all of the programs reported on here, and was the only complete program in use, it comes under considerable scrutiny in this report. We do not intend, however, that any of our comments, positive or negative, be taken as conclusive evaluations of the program. Our concern is only with the appropriateness of the program for the specific cases reported here and not with its merits relative to other available programs.

[2] Ms. A enrolled in the fall of 1994 in the same program she had been attending, but she continued to have problems with her health as well as family problems, and her attendance was extremely limited. From October, 1994 until the middle of January, 1995, she attended fewer than three classes.

[3] Ms. B re-enrolled in the fall of 1994 in the same class she had been attending and continues to come to every class. Her goals also appear to be the same as before, that is, mainly to remain with the same instructor.